



Passion Sunday Sermon, 29th March 2020

Preached by Canon Tim Alban Jones, Vice Dean of Peterborough and Chaplain to the Bishop of Peterborough

It doesn't need me to tell you that we are living in very strange times. The words 'surreal' and 'unprecedented' are much used – and rightly so because so much of our present circumstances are so very alien to us. Like me, you may have found yourself moving from a sense of the surreal to being scared – sometimes mid-sentence. When was the last time that church services were forbidden? I wonder whether it was as long ago as the very beginning of the thirteenth century when the whole country was placed under an interdict by the pope as a result of his row with the king, bad King John over the appointment of the Archbishop of Canterbury. It was at the time that the nave of our wonderful cathedral had been completed, but before the distinctive west front was added. It must have been even more terrifying for the people of Peterborough for the five years of the interdict when they were not allowed any of the rites of the church since the Church played such a significant part in their lives. Now that we have been isolated from meeting as a church, we realise again quite how important it is to come together as the body of Christ. We are also discovering new ways of expressing our corporate nature and Christ's body even though we can no longer all come together under one roof – and in the cathedral, as we know, we have a rather special roof.

The word 'unprecedented' could also be applied to this time in the Church's year. As we move towards Palm Sunday next week, through the ups and downs of Holy Week to the glories of Easter, that whole sequence was truly unprecedented. The resurrection of Jesus on Easter morning was absolutely unprecedented and because of it, we are still here some 2000 years later – though in unimaginably different circumstances.

Today the Church steps up a gear in the liturgical year as we move into the final fortnight of Lent, which we call Passiontide. Today is Passion Sunday, which marks the beginning of the season. The word passion has been rather hijacked in recent years from its original meaning. If you ask somewhat what passion means today, I suspect they would tell it is something to do with strong feelings – probably connected to love or desire, but it could also include a passion for justice or a passion of rage. In its original meaning, however, the word passion comes from a Latin word meaning to suffer. It is from this sense of suffering that our season of Passiontide gets its name as we remember again each year the sufferings – the passion – of Jesus.

Lent and Passiontide this year will be like none other the world has ever known. And even after our celebrations of Easter – whatever they may look like in a fortnight's time – we will

still be in a sort of Lent for some weeks, or even months to come. It's all rather uncharted territory. But one of the themes that has emerged strongly in the past couple of weeks is how we are finding new ways of keeping in touch. The Archbishops of Canterbury and York challenged us to find new ways of 'doing and being' the Church. This talk, being broadcast at a time when we would normally all be in the cathedral, is one small example of just that. And the quality which has emerged with a strength and depth that has been almost tangible is that of compassion. It's related to the word 'passion' and it means suffering with others in their difficulties. We were moved by the public display of gratitude for the NHS staff on Thursday evening. People up and down the country wanted publically to say thank you for the compassion shown by the amazing care provided by brave doctors and nurses and other health care workers.

This quality of compassion is one that is very familiar to Christians as we walk with Christ during these final weeks of Lent, this season of Passiontide. And we are frequently reminded of God's compassion on us his children. He loved the world so much he was prepared to send his Son Jesus to be with us, to be one of us. In this morning's gospel reading we see Jesus standing by the grave of his friend Lazarus and weeping, showing his compassion for the dead man and for the grief of his sisters Mary and Martha. Just as Jesus showed his compassion for his friends, so we – at this time of great challenge and uncertainty – need to show compassion for each other. Of course, this is something we should be doing all the time, not just in times of crisis, but now particularly we need to compassion to those in need, those who are suffering and those many who are in isolation.

So, during this season of Passiontide, may I commend you to walk with compassion with around us as we remember the sufferings of Christ, And I pray that during this time we may know something of the presence of Christ with us in our homes and in our hearts.